



BASIC HUNTING

FOR COMMON MISSOURI GAME SPECIES

RABBIT



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Published by the Missouri Department of Conservation,
PO Box 180, Jefferson City, Missouri 65102–0180

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One reason for rabbit hunting's popularity is its simplicity. No decoys, game calls, camouflage clothing, or high-tech gadgets are needed to provide a sporting pursuit and a tasty meal. Some people use dogs, while others merely walk the fields and meadows — either way, it's fairly fundamental. Rabbits have a small home range and are reluctant to leave it. After flushing from cover, a rabbit will run away, but eventually circle around back to where it was initially found.

Some rabbit hunters won't take to the field until the first good snow, but rabbit numbers are typically higher when the season starts in October than during the cold weeks of January and early February. Fall is the season when rabbit populations and protective cover are both at their highest levels. As habitat

availability is reduced by winter weather and crop harvests, rabbit populations shrink.

Good cottontail habitat includes well-distributed protective cover, a good year-round food supply, and a safe place for nesting. Brush piles can be created by loosely piling brush over rocks, old culvert pipes, or other unused equipment. Keeping the brush open at the ground level allows for freedom of movement. Place piles in close proximity to other cover such as briers, fencerows, or un-grazed pastures.

Landowners in southeast Missouri can improve habitat for swamp rabbits by protecting bottomland hardwood forests from clearing and replanting areas with native tree species. Swamp rabbits also need upland refuge to escape flooding. Brush piles and dense vegetation improve their habitat just like cottontails.



BIOLOGY OF COMMON MISSOURI RABBIT SPECIES

About Rabbits

The eastern cottontail is the most common of Missouri's two rabbit game species. Cottontails are well distributed throughout Missouri, and they provide fun, challenging hunting opportunities to novice and experienced hunters alike. Overall, rabbit numbers have been declining since the mid-1950s due to loss of habitat. However, cottontails can be found in all 114 of Missouri's counties. They prefer brushy cover, dense weedy areas, and thickets. Rabbits feed almost entirely on plants. Preferred foods include grasses, wheat, and white clover. During heavy snow cover, they eat buds, twigs, bark, and sprouts to survive.



Eastern cottontail

Swamp rabbits are a little larger than cottontails with shorter, rounder ears, and the tops of their hind feet are reddish-brown. Swamp rabbits are localized to lowlands along stream banks and drainages of the Mississippi River in southeast Missouri. Hunters can recognize their presence in an area by their unusual habit of leaving droppings on logs and stumps. Swamp rabbits are good swimmers and can escape predators by diving into water and paddling away. Swamp rabbit numbers have declined due to loss of lowland hardwood forests and swamps.

Though it may seem surprising, heavy hunting pressure does not greatly affect rabbit populations. Rabbits, like most small game, have high annual mortality (about 80 percent per year) whether they are hunted or not. If rabbits are not hunted, their populations are usually affected by other factors like parasites, disease, or predators.

Rabbits are prolific breeders, producing three to four litters of three to eight young each year. If one pair of cottontails experienced no mortality, they could produce up to 350,000 rabbits in just five years. Rabbits become sexually mature at two to three months of age, so populations can quickly increase with good habitat conditions.



BEFORE THE HUNT



Rabbit Hunting Regulations

DATES: Oct. 1 to Feb. 15

LIMITS: **Daily limit:** six, only two may be swamp rabbits;
Possession limit: 12, only four may be swamp rabbits

Only cottontail and swamp rabbits may be hunted. Jackrabbits are protected and may not be hunted or trapped.

During daylight hours of the November portion of the firearms deer hunting season, rabbits may not be chased, pursued, or taken with the aid of dogs in Butler, Carter, Dent, Iron, Madison, Oregon, Reynolds, Ripley, Shannon, or Wayne counties.

During the November and antlerless portions (in areas where open) of the firearms deer season, rabbits may be hunted only with a .22 caliber or smaller rim-fire or a shotgun and shot not larger than No. 4. This does not apply to landowners and lessees hunting on land they own or lease.

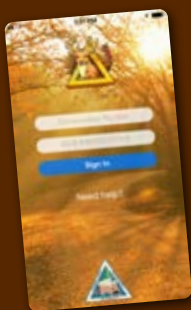


Jackrabbit



Free MO Hunting App

Use your smartphone to purchase, view, and store annual hunting permits. You can even use it to notch your permit and Telecheck your harvest directly from your permit within the application. Get it in Android or iPhone platforms at short.mdc.mo.gov/ZoQ.



Permits

Although some exceptions apply, most people wanting to hunt rabbit in Missouri will need to purchase a Small Game Hunting Permit or Small Game Hunting and Fishing Permit. These permits can be purchased over the counter from any permit vendor, online anytime at mdc.mo.gov/permits, from your smartphone using the free MO Hunting app, or by telephone at 800-392-4115. Details concerning these and other permits are available online at huntfish.mdc.mo.gov/hunting-trapping/permits.

To qualify for these permits, hunters born after Jan. 1, 1967, must be hunter-education certified. Missouri's hunter education course covers hunter responsibility and ethics; firearm operation and safety; wildlife identification and game care; outdoor survival and first aid; firearm handling and hunting techniques; and wildlife conservation and management. Classes can be taken in person, through self-study, or online. More information on hunter education certification — including exemptions — is available online at short.mdc.mo.gov/Z45.

Finding a Place to Hunt

With a range that includes all of Missouri, anyone wishing to hunt rabbits should not have to go far. Those locations offering the best rabbit hunting fall into three categories: public land, private land with open public access, and private land with restricted access.

Public Land

Public land in Missouri is owned and managed by a variety of organizations, but most of the land open to hunting is managed by MDC or the U.S. Forest Service. Public areas have many benefits, including being open to hunting by anyone with the appropriate hunting permits. Public hunting areas, which are spread throughout the state, provide relatively easy access to hunting opportunities. Locate a conservation area near you by visiting mdc.mo.gov/atlas or the Small Game Hunting Prospects brochure at short.mdc.mo.gov/ZGt. Additional information on hunting opportunities on U.S. Forest Service property is available online at fs.usda.gov/activity/mtnf/recreation/hunting.

Private Land with Public Access

Through MDC's Missouri Outdoor Recreational Access Program (MRAP), private landowners open access to their property for public use. These properties allow varying levels of activities, ranging from wildlife viewing only to all-access hunting and fishing. More information on MRAP areas, including locations and access options, is available online at short.mdc.mo.gov/ZpJ.

Private Land

With more than 93 percent of land in Missouri being privately owned, the bulk of hunting opportunities is on private land. Unlike the public land described above, most private property is not managed for wildlife habitat, but many species, such as rabbits, have adapted to these other uses. Private land offers a number of benefits, including the ability of the property owner to limit the number of hunters allowed on the property. It is important to have permission before hunting on private property. Suggestions for approaching landowners for permission to hunt on their property is available online at short.mdc.mo.gov/ZZa.

Scouting

Rabbit hunting generally does not require much if any scouting. Look for large brush piles or thick patches of brush in and along old fields. If there is snow on the ground you might be able to see tracks of where rabbits are going. Look for vegetation which has been cut at a sharp angle, this is usually a sign that rabbits have been feeding here.



Rabbit droppings



Look for vegetation with a 45-degree cut. This indicates that a rabbit has been feeding on it.



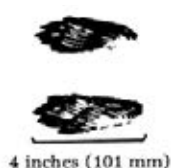
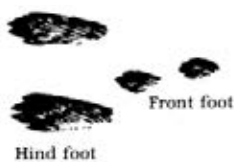
Gear and Firearms

Most hunters prefer to use shotguns, paired with shot sizes No. 4 through No. 6 to effectively and efficiently harvest rabbits. While all gauges are legal for hunting rabbits, a 20-gauge with No. 6 shot is what most prefer and start out with. For a real challenge, some hunters will use the lighter 28-gauge or .410.

Any rim-fire rifle or handgun is legal for taking rabbits in Missouri as well. This offers much more of a challenge for the hunter, as they are trying to harvest the rabbit using a single projectile. Rim-fire rifles or handguns generally leave the meat in better condition for the table than a rabbit taken with shot from a shotgun. Rim-fires are fine if only shooting at sitting rabbits where the area provides a safe backstop.

Archery and atlatl are also legal means of taking rabbits in Missouri, but are usually used by those looking for the most difficult challenge or to improve upon their shooting skills.

Gear is relatively simple. For safety's sake, always wear a blaze orange hat so others in your hunting party can easily spot you. Because you may walk long distances — sometimes through thick brush and sticker bushes — comfortable, waterproof footwear is essential, and sturdy pants, such as brush pants, chaps, or heavy overalls designed to be brier-proof, are recommended. A hunting vest with a game pouch will help you carry your quarry.



1-10 feet
(30-304 cm)



Eastern cottontail tracks

DURING THE HUNT



Hunting Strategy

Many hunters begin by walking along grown up fence rows and weedy ditches, and circling brush piles. Rabbits generally hold tight, meaning they don't make a break for it unless they feel like they are in danger. Usually when a rabbit breaks from cover they do so almost right under your feet. Take your time and move slowly, taking time to pause and scan the area. Many times, a rabbit will hear you coming; when you pause they assume that you have spotted them, triggering them to make a run for it.

Using dogs is another popular way to hunt rabbits. Beagles are the hound of choice, although some hunters use basset hounds. Hounds can get in the thick brush to flush the rabbits, but they are too slow to catch them. The hounds will chase

Primary Safety Rules

- Always keep the muzzle pointed in a safe direction
- Always positively identify your target and what is beyond it before firing
- Always keep your safety on until you are ready to shoot
- Always keep your finger outside the trigger guard until you are ready to shoot
- Always know your zone of fire and keep track of all members of your hunting party, including the dogs

the rabbit from hiding spot to hiding spot. Rabbits typically run a large circle while fleeing a pack of hounds and usually make their way back to the original starting point. When the hounds flush a rabbit, move to that spot and wait for the dogs to bring them around. To ensure the safety of the dogs as well as other hunting party members, be sure of your target and what is behind it.

AFTER THE HUNT



After a Successful Hunt

Excessive waste

It is illegal to intentionally leave or abandon any portion of any wildlife that is commonly used as human food.

Possessing, transporting, and storing wildlife

You must keep any wildlife you take separate or identifiable from that of any other hunter.

You can possess and transport wildlife as part of your personal baggage. It may be stored at your home, camp, place of lodging, or in a commercial establishment.

Proper labeling

When storing wildlife other than deer or turkey, its label must include several pieces of information:

- Hunter's full name
- Hunter's address
- Hunter's permit number
- Species
- Date it was placed in storage

When transporting wildlife other than deer or turkey, it must also be labeled with specific information:

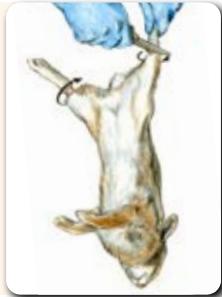
- Hunter's full name
- Hunter's address
- Hunter's permit number
- Date it was taken

How to Clean a Rabbit

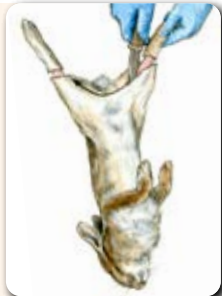
Rabbit can be excellent table fare, but first it must be prepared properly for cooking. There are multiple ways to skin a rabbit. Many demonstrations exist online by searching the phrase "skinning a rabbit." Most methods involve removing the skin before removing the entrails. This keeps your hands free of blood and hair, thus a cleaner finished product. Remember, wearing latex or nitrile gloves while cleaning rabbit limits your exposure to blood-borne infections such as tularemia.

Skinning a Rabbit

1 Start by cutting through the skin around each hind leg, just above the "knee" joint.



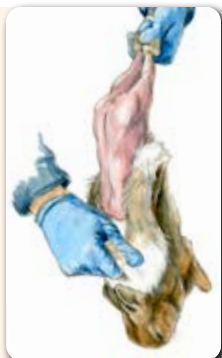
2 Cut through the skin from one hind foot to the other, staying on the inside of the legs, connecting the circular cuts made previously. Make sure to include the tail in this cut.



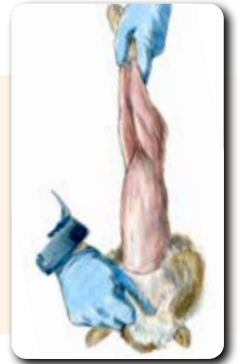
3 Pull the skin down to expose both legs.



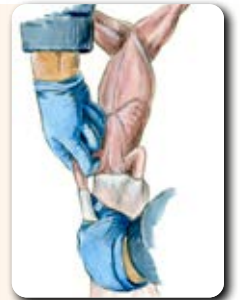
4 Run your fingers under the skin on the back, creating space between the skin and the meat that allows you to grasp the skin firmly. While holding both hind feet with one hand, pull the back skin downward until you have separated the skin from the carcass approximately half way down the rabbit's back.



5 In a similar fashion, grab the skin from the belly side of the rabbit and pull downward. Continue this process until you have removed the skin all the way down to the rabbit's front legs, just past the shoulder.



6 With your fingers, separate the skin from the rabbit's leg at the "elbow" joint. Insert the index finger or thumb of one hand into the separation between the skin and meat while grabbing the already-skinned shoulder of the rabbit with the other hand. Pull in opposite directions until the front leg is completely separated from the skin. Repeat the process with the other front leg. Continue pulling the skin downward until you have reached the base of the rabbit's head.



7 With a sharp knife, remove the rabbit's head, with skin attached, from the rest of the carcass. Remove the front and hind feet using a sharp knife. You are now ready to gut the rabbit.



8 Make an incision just below the rabbit's sternum, being careful not to puncture any internal organs. Cut downward from the sternum through the rabbit's pelvis, taking caution not to cut the intestines.



9 Reach into the rabbit's body cavity, grabbing just above the heart, and pull downward until all of the entrails are removed. Rinse the carcass thoroughly.



RABBIT CLEANING ILLUSTRATIONS: MARK RAITHEL

Cooking and Eating

Is that rabbit safe to eat?

Few game species can match the eastern cottontail for fine eating, but before you put that rabbit on the stove, take a minute to inspect it to make sure it's healthy. Tularemia is a disease caused by the bacterium *Francisella tularensis*. It can be transmitted by various means, but a common path of infection in humans is through contact with infected animal tissue, including blood. Tularemia is transmitted to rabbits through the bite of an infected tick or deer fly. Infected rabbits usually die within a few days of infection, so exposure is less likely in cold months when ticks and biting flies are less numerous and active. Waiting for cold weather to hunt may reduce your risk for encountering an infected rabbit, but it will not eliminate the risk.

Hunters cleaning rabbits should wear latex or nitrile gloves to prevent blood and tissue from contacting their skin, especially if they have any cuts or open wounds on their hands or fingers. While field dressing the rabbit, check the liver for numerous white lesions about the size of a pin head. If you find these, the rabbit should be discarded and not eaten. Tularemia can also be transmitted through consumption of meat that is not thoroughly cooked, so be sure to heat rabbit meat to a minimum of 165 degrees to kill any potential disease.

If you come down with flu-like symptoms after handling rabbits, you should seek medical attention and notify your doctor that you might have been exposed to tularemia. Treatment with antibiotics is standard for infected persons.

RABBIT CACCIATORE

Ingredients

- 1 whole rabbit, cut into pieces
- 1 package sliced button mushrooms
- 14-ounce can diced Italian-seasoned tomatoes (drained)
- 12 ounces cooked pasta (rotini or fettuccini)
- 3 tablespoons flour
- 2 teaspoons chopped garlic
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon pepper
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 2 tablespoons tomato paste
- 1 cup chopped onion
- Red wine

Instructions

- 1** Dust rabbit with enough flour to coat, and season with salt and pepper.
- 2** In skillet, heat olive oil over medium-high heat.
- 3** Add rabbit and cook for approximately 3 minutes per side, remove rabbit and set aside.
- 4** Add onions, mushrooms, and garlic to the skillet. Reduce the heat to medium and cook for 5 minutes, stirring occasionally.
- 5** Add drained tomatoes, red wine, and tomato paste, bring to a boil.
- 6** Add rabbit, and tuck into the sauce. Cook mixture on medium-low heat partially covered for approximately 8 minutes, until the meat is tender.
- 7** Serve over cooked pasta of choice.

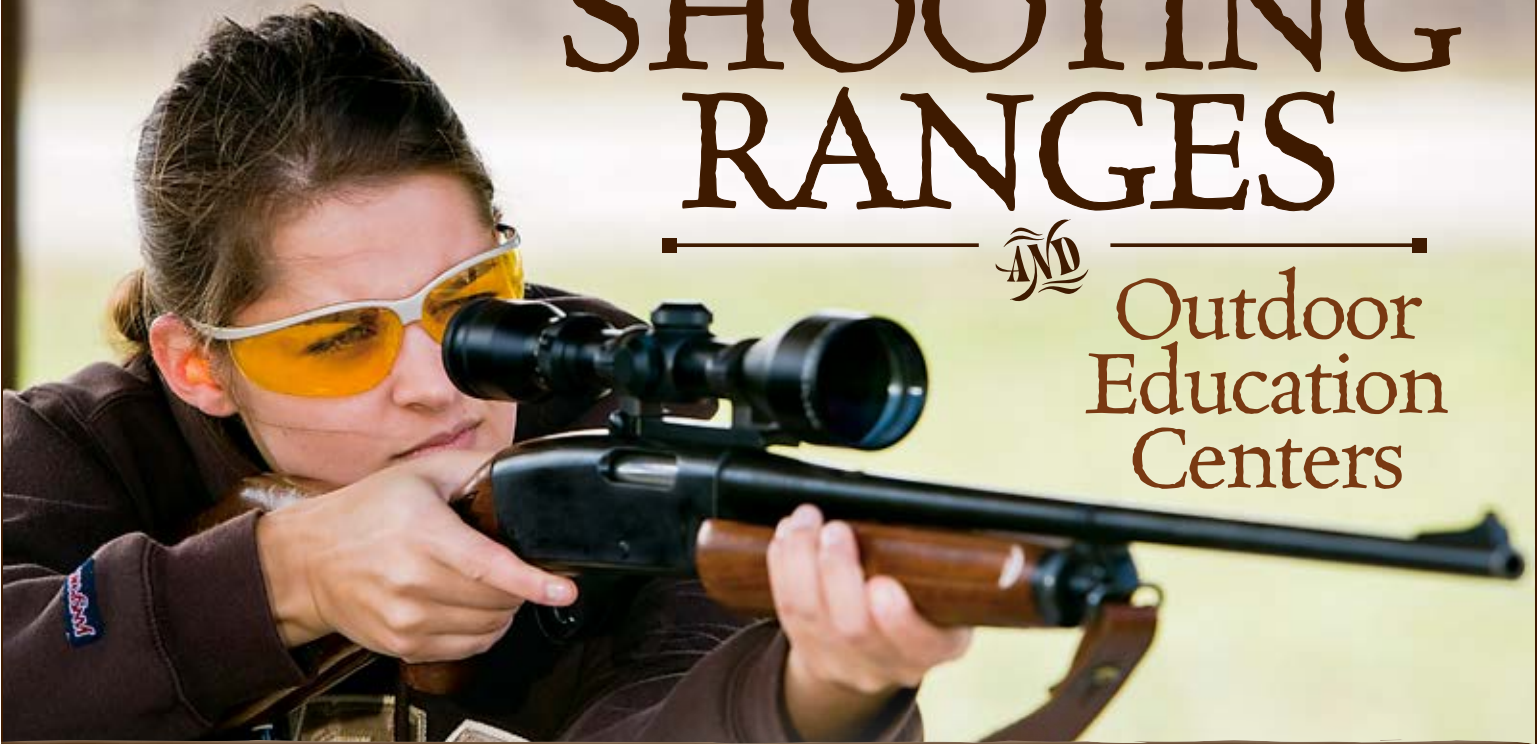


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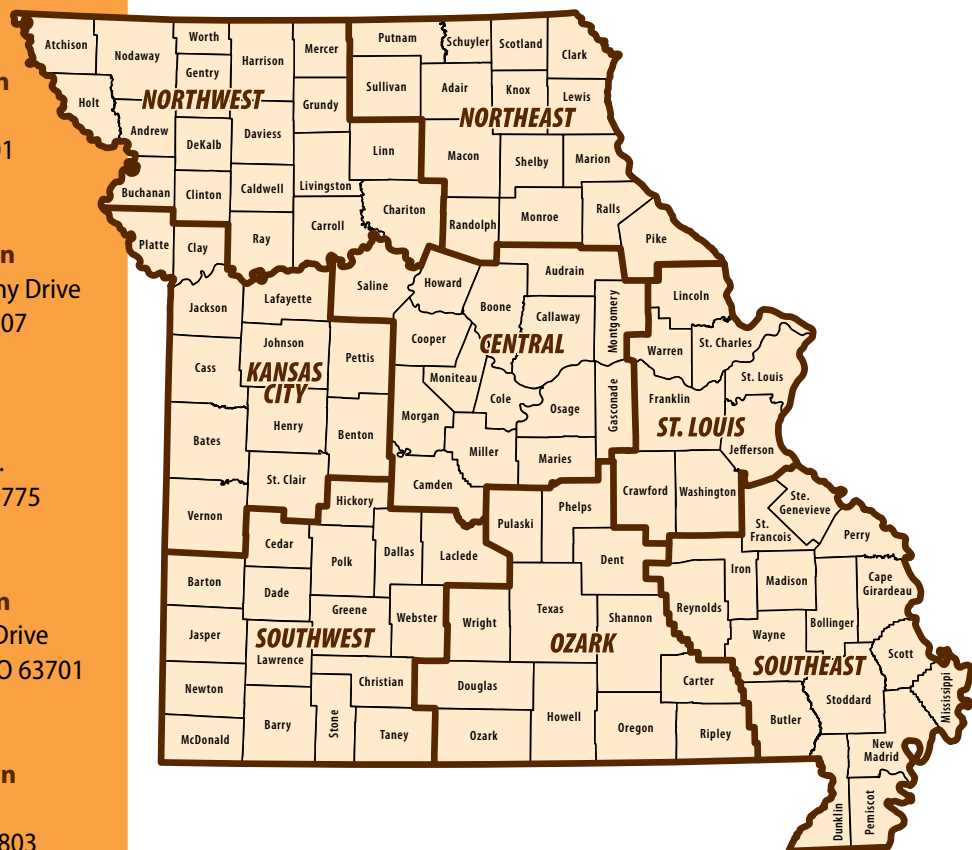
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